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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001194

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: A CROWDED FIELD, BUT LITTLE TRUE COMPETITION FOR
KARZAI

REF: A. KABUL 1174

[1](#)B. KABUL 1109

[1](#)C. KABUL 1124

[1](#)D. KABUL 535

[1](#)E. KABUL 533

[1](#)F. KABUL 991

Classified By: Acting DCM Alan Yu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Candidate registration for the Aug. 20 presidential election closed May 8, with at least 44 candidates turning in completed registration forms. We will report septel on provincial council registration, particularly on female candidate registration. President Karzai appears to hold a significant advantage over his nearest competitors, who were unable to merge their campaigns into a unity ticket before the deadline. In the end, only three of the half-dozen rumored top-tier challengers registered, and two of those signed up alongside relatively obscure running mates, signaling a lack of broad-based support for their campaigns among Afghanistan's political powerbrokers (ref A). The other registered candidates include two women, communist-era figures, and parliamentary backbenchers. We expect Karzai to win re-election. End Summary.

A Look At the Candidates

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Independent Election Commission (IEC) reported that 44 candidates had submitted completed registration paperwork before the May 8 deadline. The high number of candidates easily tops the 18 entrants in the 2004 presidential election. Despite the large field, only a few candidates look likely to attract measurable support: Karzai, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and Deputy Lower House Speaker Mirwais Yaseni. Karzai, Ghani, and Yaseni are ethnic Pashtuns. Abdullah is of mixed Tajik/Pashtun heritage, though most Afghans associate him with the Tajik community.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Most candidates are unknown to the larger Afghan population. Would-be top-tier candidates former Interior Minister Ali Ahmed Jalali and former Finance Minister Anwarulhaq Ahadi waited until the last minute before deciding not to register. Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad also did not register, while Nangarhar Gov. Gul Aga Sherzai decided last week to end his campaign (ref B).

[1](#)4. (SBU) The field of candidates includes five current members of Parliament, one current Cabinet Minister (Senior Minister Without Portfolio Hedayat Amin Arsala), seven former ministers, two women, two commanders who fought alongside the Taliban, and three candidates from the 2004 election. As many as five candidates had dual citizenship before registering their campaigns (the Afghan Constitution requires presidential candidates to renounce any foreign citizenship). Vice presidential nominees are mostly political unknowns, featuring a handful of women, doctors, academics, and three

MPs.

Karzai Aiming For First Round Victory

15. (C) Despite the crowded field, we expect Karzai to win re-election. At this point, a more relevant question is whether he will gain the 50 percent necessary to win in the first round, or whether low turnout in the south and multiple Pashtun candidates will force the election to a second round.

Despite signs that his popularity has declined among Kabul elite and other leading politicians, Karzai is still the only national-level figure in the race. He appears to enjoy continued support from most Upper House MPs, many Pashtun Lower House MPs, nearly all governors, and several leaders of other political movements, such as National Islamic Front of Afghanistan founder Pir Gailani. We expect uncommitted groups to eventually endorse Karzai, as political leaders seek out Cabinet positions and other appointments from the probable winner.

16. (C) Opposition groups and most anti-Karzai political leaders are disappointed with their alternatives, though none has offered a practical way forward to organize a unified, credible challenge to the incumbent. Unaffiliated groups, both political and tribal, are gradually moving into the Karzai camp, jockeying for the political benefits that come with being on the winning side. Assuming the political consensus solidifies around an apparent Karzai re-election, this trend will continue and expand.

17. (C) Last week's clarification by the IEC that candidates

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may change their running mates mid-campaign offers a last-minute chance for opposition groups to merge campaigns and appeal to a broader cross-section of the Afghan electorate before Aug. 20 (ref C). A credible challenger could ignite an open debate over the issues most important to the population) a feature sorely lacking from the campaign thus far. Absent a successful effort by the opposition to unite, Karzai will control his own destiny at this summer's polls.

Bases of Support

18. (SBU) Karzai has locked up support from a number of political groups and influential individuals. None of the other major candidates in the race is a southern Pashtun or identified closely with tribal politics. Karzai also successfully divided the UF, tapping UF co-founder Marshall Fahim to be his running mate, winning support from second-tier UF members (ref D). Other UF central committee members, upset at the behind-closed-doors selection of Abdullah by UF leader Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani and Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni, have defected to other campaigns or left the coalition.

Abdullah

19. (SBU) Abdullah hopes to retain the support of the northern Tajik communities that supplied the majority of votes for Qanooni's runner-up placing in 2004. (Qanooni received 16 percent of the national popular vote and finished first in seven provinces.) Abdullah, however, is hampered by his failure to recruit well-known running mates from other ethnic groups to broaden his appeal. His choices of royalist Humayoun Shah Asifi and academic Cheragh Ali Cheragh check the Pashtun and Hazara boxes, respectively, but do not bring high name recognition or political weight. Abdullah will be hard pressed to improve Qanooni's 2004 performance absent a successful mid-campaign effort to consolidate support from other campaigns and opposition leaders, and perhaps swap out one or both vice presidential nominees for more influential

figures.

Yaseni

¶10. (SBU) Of all the challengers, Yaseni has fielded the most well-known slate of running mates, choosing two colleagues from the Lower House. Second Deputy Speaker Amanullah Payman (Badakhshan, Tajik) and MP Abdul Qayum Sajaddi (Ghazni, Hazara) offer regional and ethnic balance to Yaseni's (Nangarhar, Pashtun) ticket, and bring legislative experience and existing electoral constituencies (ref E). Nevertheless, Yaseni probably does not have the national prominence, high-powered political backing, or financial resources to challenge Karzai.

Ghani

¶11. (C) Ashraf Ghani, like Abdullah, failed to win support from other notable political movements and resorted to registering with little-known running mates Ayub Rafiqi and Qayum Nabizada. Ghani insists he is committed to running a serious, high-profile campaign and renounced his U.S. citizenship hours before registering. But as with other candidates, he will need to build a broad coalition over the summer if he expects to pose a serious challenge to Karzai.

Some Minor Candidates May Appeal to Small Constituencies

¶12. (C) Female Candidates: The remainder of the field will have trouble breaking into even single digit-levels of support, though a few may appeal to certain segments of the population. Female candidates Ferozan Fana and Lower House MP Shahla Atta (a Kabul Pashtun and U.S. citizen who did not renounce her citizenship at the Embassy) could draw greater international and media attention for their candidacies than their almost non-existent political support merits. Massouda Jalal, the only female candidate in the 2004 election and at the time a well-known political figure, placed sixth with 1.1 percent of the vote.

¶13. (SBU) Parliamentarians: Lower House MPs Atta, Ramazan Bashardost (Kabul, Hazara), Mullah Abdul Salaam Raket (Zabol, Pashtun), and Abdul Qader Imami Ghor (Ghor, Tajik) may appeal to small segments of voters in their home provinces, though none won greater than a 10 percent share of the vote in their home provinces during the 2005 Lower House

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elections. Bashardost should draw several thousand votes from western Kabul, where his populist anti-corruption crusade resonates with lower-class Hazaras. Raket may win support from tribal elders in his home region within Zabol, but should not be a major factor even at the provincial level.

¶14. (SBU) Other Notables: Ethnic Turkmen leader Akbar Bai may attract support from Turkmen communities in the far north, but most analysts expect the bulk of Turkmen votes (no more than 3 percent of the national total) to follow the endorsements of Afghan Uzbek warlord Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum or the majority-Uzbek Junbesh party. Both Raket and independent candidate Mawlawi Mohammed Sayed Hashimi previously fought alongside the Taliban, experience which could appeal to current Taliban members and sympathizers who choose to participate in the election. Other recognizable names in the field include Senior Cabinet Minister Hedayat Amin Arsala, former Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet, Persian Gulf-based businessman Sayed Jalal Karim, and Shanawaz Tanai, who led an unsuccessful 1990 coup against the Soviet-backed government.

Political Parties a Non-Factor

¶15. (SBU) Despite more than 100 registered political parties active in Afghanistan, few candidates have embraced party endorsements. Karzai has the implicit endorsement of parties run by some of his top advisors, such as Lower House MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf's Dawat-e-Islami Party, Palace Chief of Policy Sebghatullah Sanjar's Republican Party, and Second Vice President Karim Khalili's Hezb-e-Wahdat-e-Milli, though Karzai rarely cites their support in public comments.

¶16. (SBU) Abdullah is running with the backing of the United Front opposition coalition, but high-profile defections have led him to describe his campaign as "independent with the support of the UF" to the media. Reformist politicians have cited Abdullah's association with the UF and its founding warlords as one reason they have declined to rally to his campaign.

¶17. (SBU) Afghan Millat, a Pashtun nationalist organization and one of the country's oldest political parties, had earlier endorsed Ahadi, who chose not to register. Junbesh and Hezb-e-Wahdat-e-Mardum, the two largest parties representing Uzbeks and Hazaras, respectively, earlier agreed to endorse a single candidate from outside their own ranks, but have yet to announce their decision (ref F). Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan, another large party, also declined to field its own candidate and has yet to reveal an endorsement.

¶18. (SBU) Representatives from several smaller democratic parties vowed to endorse a joint candidate from the existing field to promote a pro-democratization agenda, but at least three democratic party chiefs have told PolOff they were dissatisfied with all 44 candidates.

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